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State Department Syria Memo: Setting the Stage for War with Russia

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Secretary of State John Kerry met Tuesday morning with several of the State Department "diplomats" who drafted an internal dissent memo calling for the US to launch air strikes against the Syrian government, supposedly as a means of bringing an end to the five-year-old war that has claimed well over a quarter of a million lives and driven over half the Syrian population from their homes.

The *New York Times* reported that Kerry and 10 of 51 mid-level operatives who signed the memo "engaged in a surprisingly cordial conversation" over the memo, which was leaked to the media virtually before the ink on it was dry.

There was nothing surprising about the tone of the meeting. Traveling in Europe when the memo surfaced in the press last week, Kerry described it as "an important statement."

The reality is that the policy proposed in the memo is one that Kerry has himself advocated within the Obama administration for years as a means of turning the tide in a war for regime-change that has employed Al Qaeda-linked and CIA-backed Sunni militias as proxy forces.

In 2013, the then-newly installed secretary of state was one of the most bellicose proponents of a direct US military intervention to topple the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad after the Obama administration declared its "red line" over the use of chemical weapons. It was Kerry who laid out the brief for war in August of that year, based on the fraudulent claim that Assad government forces were responsible for a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs.

The Obama administration stepped back from the threatened direct military intervention in the face of overwhelming popular opposition to another Middle East war and amid deep divisions between the US military brass, on the one hand, and the State Department and CIA, on the other, about the advisability of such an intervention.

Instead, the administration embraced a chemical weapons disarmament plan brokered by Moscow. Subsequently, in 2014, it launched air strikes and sent hundreds of Special Forces into Syria—in direct violation of international law—on the pretext of fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a viciously sectarian Islamist militia that Washington had tacitly supported until it overran much of Iraq, routing US-armed and trained security forces.

That this was a phony war was exposed by Russia's own military intervention in Syria a year later, which succeeded—together with Syrian government troops—in dealing serious blows to both ISIS and the Al Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda Syrian outfit that Washington still protects.

This is the situation that has prompted the State Department dissent memo. The so-called "rebels" backed by Washington are not only in a state of shambles, but are turning the guns supplied by the CIA and the Pentagon against each other.

The cease-fire, which the State Department dissidents claim to want to enforce through military escalation, has been used by Washington to funnel more weapons to the Islamist militias, reposition their forces and blunt the Russian-backed Syrian army offensive. It has not, however, succeeded in shifting the tide of battle in support of the Western-backed forces.

Thus the need for what the State Department operatives call "a more militarily assertive US role in Syria, based on the judicious use of stand-off and air weapons, which would undergird and drive a more focused and hardnose US-led diplomatic process."

In other words, another exercise in "shock and awe," with US Tomahawk missiles and smart bombs raining down on Damascus, just as they did previously on Kabul, Baghdad and Tripoli, will set things right.

This argument, completely in sync with the militarist ideology of the criminals in the Bush administration who orchestrated the war based upon lies that destroyed Iraq, is combined with a "humanitarian" appeal.

The statement asserts that "the moral rationale for taking steps to end the deaths and suffering in Syria, after five years of brutal war, is evident and unquestionable." No one would suspect from this cynical rationale that the "five years of brutal war" are the direct product of the massive regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington itself. The argument, however, dovetails with the hypocritical anti-imperialist campaign waged by the pseudo-left, including such organizations as the International Socialist Organization in the US, the New Anti-capitalist Party in France and the Left Party in Germany, which have gone so far as to extol this CIA-backed regime-change operation as a "revolution."

The frustration expressed by the State Department dissidents is not just with the failure of Obama's Syria policy, but with that of US imperialism's entire Middle East strategy over the course of a quarter-century.

In the wake of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy's liquidation of the Soviet Union, Washington embarked on a course of unending war based upon the conviction that militarism and neocolonial conquest could offset the historic crisis and economic decline of American capitalism. The crude ideology justifying this strategy of criminal aggression was summed up by the *Wall Street Journal* at the time of the first Gulf War in 1991 with the slogan, "force works."

As it turned out, however, it didn't. A quarter-century of US wars in the region have yielded only a debacle, killing and maiming millions, turning tens of millions into homeless refugees, and leaving the social fabric of the entire region in tatters.

The answer provided by the authors of the State Department memo to this debacle is yet a further military escalation, this time with the distinct threat of triggering a nuclear world war.

"We are not advocating for a slippery slope that ends in a military confrontation with

Russia," the memo states, quickly adding that its authors "recognize that the risk of further deterioration in US-Russian relations is significant and that military steps… may yield a number of second-order effects."

Among these "second order effects" are the killing of Russian and Iranian military personnel deployed with Syrian government forces, the likelihood of the bringing down of both US and Russian warplanes, and an escalation of mutual hostilities.

This is where the "slippery slope" that the State Department dissenters "are not advocating" leads. Such a progression is hardly an accident. From the outset, the US proxy war for regime-change was launched with the aim of depriving Moscow and Teheran of their principal ally in the Arab world in preparation for direct confrontation with both countries.

The call for a direct US military intervention against Damascus has been made under conditions in which tensions between Washington and Moscow are today greater than at any time since the height of the Cold War. Continuous NATO military exercises on Russia's western borders and the deployment of anti-missile systems in Eastern Europe designed to prepare a "winnable" nuclear war against Moscow point to the mounting danger of a confrontation between the world's two major nuclear powers.

The Obama White House has dismissed the proposals in the State Department memo. There is no inclination to roll out a major new military intervention before the November elections. The American ruling establishment has always been loath to provide the American people even the remotest opportunity to express their attitude to war.

Whichever party wins, however, the incoming administration will embark on a dangerous escalation of militarism. Both the Democratic and Republican presumptive candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, have expressed their support for intensified bombing, the imposition of a no-fly zone and other acts of aggression. More fundamentally, the drive to war is rooted in the steadily deepening crisis of American capitalism and the uncontainable tensions building up in US society.

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